Love Is Something You Do
I John - selected; Matthew 5:43-48
June 1, 1969

It sounds a little like a Charlie Brown sampler, or a Sister Corita poster, but "love is something you do." It is one of those "catch phrases" that adorn sweatshirts and picket signs, the subtetly of which leaps out of print and strikes down deeply within us. But that sentence also contains a very sophisticated and a very radical and a very Christian concept of the meaning of the word love.

It is difficult to talk sensibly about love for the very simple reason that the English language is poor here, and that "love" is an extremely versatile word. Linguists write volumes on the many meanings of the word and most conclude that the best thing to happen would be to strike the word from our vocabulary and begin to use a whole series of words that are more precise.

After all, we do use "love" to describe a whole range of feelings that actually are not even related. We love our country; we love a song; we love a school or university; we love a dress, or a suit, and automobile, our home. We use the word to describe everything from sexual relations to the relationship a father has with his son. We use it in fraternal organizations among men; in the life-long commitment of marriage; we whisper it to each other as adolescents and sing about it and now we've even used it to label a brand of cosmetics.

In the mythology of our culture we have been conditioned to expect love to "happen" to us one day; right out of the blue. We've been conditioned to think of romantic love in terms of bells ringing and lights flashing, and a temporary loss of our ability to function. What is worse we have so sustained the myth that many married people find themselves in trouble because these mythological definitions of love have just not been part of their experience.

When we use the word "love" , ordinarily we are dealing with feelings and emotions which we experience. But when the New Testament uses the word it has nothing whatever to do with subjective, experienced feelings. Love, in the New Testament, is something you do, not something you feel.

The Greeks - and the New Testament was written in Greek - had several words - all of which we translate as love.

Eros, from which we get "erotic" indicated physical, sexual attraction. In its best sense, and its original sense, it indicated the healthy desire of one person for another person. In our culture, however, the "erotic" has been exploited to sell motion pictures, and magazines and even weed killers. But, [illegible] eros meant physical attraction.

That, the Greeks understood, was quite different from what transpires between members of a family, or between good friends. That relationship the called Philia, familial affection. Philadelphia is the city of Brotherly Love: filial devotion is what a parent has for his children. We call it love: the Greeks called it Philia.

There are other Greek words that are translated love, but these two - eros and philia - bring the semantic problem into perspective. But when the New Testament talks about love it uses still another word - Agape.

One semanticist comments that "agape has neither the warmth of philia, nor the intensity of eros; that it refers to the will rather than to the emotion; and that it is concerned most about the demonstration of love through action." (A. Richardson, Theolobical Word Book of the Bible)

Agape is bene[illegible]tion, and notice that it has nothing to do with feelings. That is when we get into trouble. If you've heard many sermons chances [illegible] you've heard the content of this one several times before. Every school boy knows that love is many things and that the New Testament idea of love is a little different from what goes by that name in our culture. Everybody knows that Christianity teaches men to love each other. But we get stalled at this point because no amount of preaching, no amount of church-going - no amount of internal discipline - has been able to make us feel love.

We, like all men, are basically "responders" when it comes to love. We are very much inclined to feel love for those who love us. When it comes to serving or helping someone we do it generously and immediately so long as the someone

prompts feelings of love within us. But we have real trouble with this business of love when the object of our love doesn't know us - or perhaps does know us and doesn't like us.

In addition we've been told that a Christian has love in his heart for all men - that is, he feels love for everyone; that a true Christian has a perpetual smile on his face and never says a bad thing about anyone.

Now, add those two together, and you have the profile of a problem. We don't feel love for all men - we think we should - and the reaction of many people at this point is quietly to reject Christianity as a bunch of sentimental, naive, nonsense. And given their assumptions, that reaction is quite appropriate.

However, there is more to it than this. Joseph Fletcher put it this way: "To suppose that we are required by any Christian imperative to like everybody is a cheap hypocrisy ethically and an impossibility psychologically."

And Don Rickles, perhaps even more relevantly, speaks for all men: " I've yet to meet the man I don't dislike."

There are some people we just don't like; perhaps for wrong reasons - perhaps for appropriate reasons. There are people who offend us - who displease us - who "turn us off." We cannot, in honesty, feel affection for the man who threatens us, the bully who continually harasses our children, Ho Chi Minh, or even some people in our own Church. And pious admonitions exhorting us to feel otherwise are so much wasted verbiage.

The Gospel is not naive: It is not very sentimental. What it says at this point is that your feelings are irrelevant. We're not talking, here, about your emotions. What we are commanded to do is to deal lovingly, benevolently, with all men - regardless of how we feel toward them. This is the "tough" side of the Gospel - the side that gets hidden by a lot of sticky sentimentalism. Jesus pointed out that anybody can, and everybody does, love their friends, family and neighbors. That is, we respond with feelings of love toward those who love us. The extraordinary - the specifically Christian imperative is to deal lovingly with even the enemy.

It was ironical that several years ago, in the midst of the great debate that accompanied the establishing of our Civil Rights laws, many people were saying "you can't legislate love." And Christians were getting up set and quoting the Bible on love, and generally feeling very anxious about this threat to one of the foundations of their faith. Of course you can't legislate love - if what you mean by love has to do with feelings and emotions. But that is irrelevant. What you can do, and what Jesus did, was legislate that people shall be dealt with lovingly - or justly - or equally. One of the more creative aspects of the whole Black Power idea is that how whites feel about blacks has suddenly become rather unimportant. Black militants simply don't care about that anymore. What is germane and essential is the way people are treated by other people and institutions - regardless of how they feel.

The love the New Testament talks about - agape love - I believe boils down to this: it is the clear imperative to deal lovingly with the unlovable - with those you do not like.

The second thing about Christian love is that it is non-judgmental and non-reciprocal. When Jesus told his disciples to love their enemies - he was not urging them to condone the activities of those who persecuted them and spat on them and cursed them. That is to say, Christian love does not eliminate making value judgments about other people; it simply removes love from those value judgments. Christians are called to deal lovingly with others even when they are violently opposed to what the other is doing.

In other words, Christian love is not reserved for the deserving! When it comes to the business of charitable, benevolent work the Church cannot seek those who, for one reason or another, deserve help without overstepping the boundaries of love. Neither is Christian love reserved for those who will be grateful when they have received it.

The Church, I believe, has made some very strategic misjudgments at this point. I, for one, have always been very uncomfortable with the Thanksgiving and Christmas

charity that literally gushes from the Church annually; because the beneficiaries of that charity are not really the poor - for whom the conditions of poverty remain - but the donors, the ones who have given without sacrificing or caring, and who will reap a harvest of good feelings from the gratitude of those they have given a few samples of affluence.

Christian love is not a feeling but an activity. It is not judgmental and it does not demand a response of gratitude. The third and perhaps the most important thing about this love is that it is the test of Christian faith. I read to you this morning from the first letter of John. New Testament scholars speculate that the author may have been the last living associate of Jesus. We know that the letter was written in a time when all kinds of divergent and alien ideas were creeping into the Church, and that the letter was an attempt to set down in writing some standard by which men and their beliefs could be measured. One general theme runs through this letter - love. Love is the test of Christian faith. This is how it reads: "Here is the test by which we can make sure that we know him: do we keep his commands? . . . My children, love .must not be a matter of words or talk: it must be genuine and show itself in action. . ."

It appears that the Church of Jesus Christ has spent a lot of time devising other standards: theological orthodoxy: adherence to certain ethical prohibitions - everything, in fact, but this ultimate test. But this is it: this is what defines a Christian: this is what he does uniquely and specifically - he loves.

How? If love is a matter of feeling, we are in trouble. But agape - love is a matter of will. It is a matter of living and acting in a certain way. And that we can do. How can we do? - choose to do it. Will to do it. Forget our feelings and love because that is how we are called to be.

And then, having divorced this process entirely from the arena of human emotion, a miracle happens. Feeling is born: love - as emotion reappears - but this time in a new way. Before, our love for others was based on their worthiness - and our need. Now we love - for no one's sake but God's. That's what agape means - loving for God's sake.

That's what the New Testament means by love. That's what the cross means - God's own unmerited love for us. That wasn't a feeling - but an act, a costly act. And it is the promise of the Gospel that that act - that supreme self-giving - that perfect love - is what enables us to love.

Love is somthing you do. May God grant us grace that we may - do it.

Amen.